

THOUGHTS
ON
VARIOUS CAUSES
OF
ERROR, &c.

THE
HISTORY
OF
VARIOUS CAUSES



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T H O U G H T S
O N
V A R I O U S C A U S E S
O F
E R R O R,
PARTICULARLY WITH REGARD TO
MODERN UNITARIAN WRITERS.

By the Rev. JOHN WEDDRED,
VICAR OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST, PETERBOROUGH; AND
MEMBER OF TRINITY COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE.

*" There are Errors that would bereave us of every hope which
" points to immortality—and Heresies of the most malignant
" tendency have their advocates."*

White's Sermon, at Bampton's Lecture.

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P R E F A C E.

DR. *Priestly*, with the whole body of *Unitarian writers*, loudly complains, that christianity has been corrupted, and those corruptions still continue to debase it, by the additions of designing and interested men. On the contrary, the more sober and virtuous part of mankind, with much more truth and reason, complain of Dr. *Priestly* corrupting christianity, by depriving it of every doctrine essentially necessary, to entitle it to that distinguished name.

From a careful attention to the *writings* and *conduct* of those gentlemen, who are pleased to distinguish themselves by the name of *Unitarians*, I have endeavoured, in the following tract, to point out a few of

the many causes, which apparently *pervert* their *judgment* and influence their *pens*.

Far, very far be it from me, to pour out an *anathema* against any particular sect or party, into which we are most unhappily divided.—Being very sensible, that there are many amongst the *dissenters*, whose lives and conversation are a real ornament to religion.

The church of England lays no claim to infallibility, and consequently allows none of her members to assume that power; but would have them to *hold the truth in love**, and to *deal gently for her sake* with all ment. Her only desire is, nay she ardently prays, “that all who profess and call themselves christians may be led into the way of truth, and hold the faith in

* *Eph. iv, 15.*

† *2. Sam. viii, 5,*

unity of spirit, in the bond of peace, and in righteousness of life." Wisely considering *what manner of spirit she is of**, she reprobates no man that is not included in her own pale, provided, he be sincerely devout, and just, and sober to the best of his knowledge. She looks upon mankind at large as common children of one common parent, *who made of one blood all nations of men*†, and embraces them with the cordial affection of brethren. " To those who differ from her, says the late learned and pious archbishop *Secker*, she neither attempts nor wishes any injury. And she will gladly give proofs to every denomination of christians, that she is a friend to toleration even of the most intolerant, as far as it is safe; and will-

* *Luke ix, 55.*

† *Acts xvii, 26.*

“ ing that all mankind should possess all
“ the advantages, religious and civil, which
“ they can demand either in law or rea-
“ son*.”

* Answer to Dr. Mayhew.

THOUGHTS

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ERROR,

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THERE is, doubtless, an inherent excellence in the holy scripture, something so congenial to the best interests of every virtuous mind, as will always recommend it to the serious attention of the wise and good.

The fanciful delusions of *modern philosophy*, afford but little comfort and satisfaction to the thoughtful and considerate mind—Its visionary speculations may, perhaps for a while, amuse and entertain the fancy; but like the morning cloud or early dew,
soon

soon pass away*; leaving us benighted in our search after those bright and exalted truths which ought to be our principal care and study.

Whereas the holy scripture, on the most solid and satisfactory grounds, gives to virtue its sweetest hopes, and to true penitence its best consolation. The Gospel does not, like the delusive schemes of *modern philosophers*, leave the mind to wander through the intricate mazes of doubt and uncertainty, respecting its present hopes and future happiness; but fully removes all the fears of a guilty, provided it be a truly penitent, mind. It quiets the anxieties of a troubled breast, and is an

* It was the observation of a young man in *Tully*, with regard to the great question of the soul's immortality, that " whilst he read the treatise of *Plato* on the subject, he was convinced by his reasoning; but when he lay down the book, and revolved the matter with himself, his assent vanished. So numerous, it may be presumed, or so perplexing were the difficulties, which the state of things then presented to his mind, that they effaced the impressions made by *philosophy*." *Churton's Sermon at Bampton's Lecture, Sermon. I.*

*anchor of the soul both sure and steadfast**, which will never loose its hold. The sincere christian knows in whom he believest— The ground upon which he treads is HOLY.

Notwithstanding the high tone in which *modern philosophy* dictates to the world, and the contemptuous sneers it wantonly throws, upon the most sublime, benevolent, and distinguishing doctrines of our holy religion; yet sensible of its weakness and insufficiency, it would gladly be thought to unite, with its own imperfect schemes of happiness, the *hope* and *consolation* of the Gospel—Its warmest votaries, however they may secretly despise the authority of scripture, would fain be thought workers together with it, for the good of mankind.

No sooner did *the sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings*†, than clouds of error and heresy, successively appeared

* Heb. vi, 19.

† 2 Tim. i, 12.

‡ Mal, iv, 2.

to eclipse the brightness, and dim the splendor of his heavenly rays. But no age, perhaps, is more distinguished for a bold and innovating spirit, than the present. The distinguishing doctrines of christianity, are treated with the most licentious freedom—A freedom, every way inconsistent with the weakness, frailty, and limited faculties, even of men, of the most eminent abilities, and the highest intellectual attainments.

It is not so much as to be doubted, but that there are many aimiable and truly valuable characters amongst those, who *affectedly* distinguish themselves by the name of *Unitarians*.—Nay it certainly reflects much honor upon the virtue and integrity of those gentlemen, who have freely relinquished the emoluments of the church, (with too many, alas, the strongest and most endearing ties) for the testimony of a good conscience.

On the contrary, the mind shrinks back with *horror* from contemplating the conduct

duct of those men, who in spite of every sacred tie and obligation, openly maintain and assiduously propogate, principles contrary to the *known* and *established* doctrines of the *church of England*; who for the sake of *filthy lucre*, are willing to sacrifice every thing dear to a virtuous mind. Well may we complain of the degeneracy of the times—In vain may we look for the establishment of truth and justice, religion and piety, amongst the various ranks and orders of society; whilst those, whose peculiar office it is, to recommend from the pulpit, and to give a fair copy of these graces and virtues in their lives, wantonly sport with the most *sacred oaths*, and slight the most solemn engagements*.

However,

* Whether the doctrines contained in the thirty-nine articles of the church of England, are true or false, is foreign to the present argument. Yet, I cannot help thinking the following animadversion, and indeed the whole pamphlet, every way unworthy of, and inconsistent with, the honor and dignity of a bishop of the established church. “ For these said
“ articles are called only thirty-nine, yet no man must from
“ hence imagine that he has only thirty-nine propositions to

However, (from a principle of a virtuous and well directed *zeal*, a *zeal* highly requi-

“ deal with; He will find four or five times that number,
“ though bound up indeed into so many bundles, &c.”

Dr. *Law's*, Lord Bishop of Carlisle, Considerations on the Propriety of requiring Subscription to Articles of Faith. p. 6. Note.

I forbear to make any reflections of my own, I rather wish to impress the reader's mind with the *just* and *honest* sentiments of others.

“ In this country,” says a truly excellent prelate, “ there
“ is an established faith, and an established worship adopted to
“ it, both of approved excellence, framed by men of as distinguished wisdom and as distinguished piety as ever lived
“ upon earth; framed with the strictest regard to scripture
“ truth, and calculated to promote the great truths of Christianity among all ranks of men. Such an establishment hath
“ a claim to some deference and respect from her sons at least,
“ from those especially who are engaged in her service by the
“ most solemn professions, who live of the sacrifice, and eat
“ of the *milk of the flock*.”

Dr. *Bagot's*, Lord Bishop of Norwich, Letter to Dr. *Bell*, p. 2.

“ Satire and invective against the church, will do no credit either to the good sense or good temper of a writer of any denomination, but must come with a peculiar impriety from those, who have professed allegiance to her laws, and who subsist by her appointments.”

Sturges's Considerations on the present State of Church Establishment. p. 132.

See also, *White's* Sermon at *Bampton's* Lecture. p. 15.

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sit in *these days*, when the generality of those, who are the natural guardians and defenders of religion, seem insensible of and dead to its best interests), however, we may detest the pernicious effects and consequences of the *Unitarian* principles, as ultimately tending to subvert the most benevolent and interesting designs of the Gospel; we cannot help viewing the maintainers of them, as partaking of the same nature, as children of the same God, who is *the father of us all**, with the tenderness of a pitying angel.—We cannot for a moment entertain the unpleasing thought of their wantonly rejecting the great truths of Christianity; or *designedly* explaining away *those exceeding great and precious promises*†, which so many wise and good men have earnestly desired to hear.

Yet, notwithstanding the boasted purity of their intentions, and the arrogant claim to the title of the Sons of Wisdom; every day's experience proves, that they are of

* Eph. iv. 6.

† 2 Pet. i. 4.

like passions with other men; subject to the same frailties, liable to the same mistakes, and susceptible of the same impressions, from the profits, pleasures, and flattering delusions of the world.

It may therefore have its use, to point out a few, of the many causes, which apparently (though perhaps imperceptibly to themselves) tend to pervert the *judgment*, and influence the *pens*, of *Unitarian writers* in particular.

The first and grand source of *error*, is the abuse of principles. The understanding must necessarily have always something to rest itself upon; and from the conformity and resemblance of other things to itself, to infer the certainty and evidence of its assents. For as the human mind is limited, an infinite progression is disagreeable to its nature. Accordingly the understanding is never satisfied in its enquiries, till it discovers some original, universal, unquestionable, self-evident truth, from which
all

all other truths are fundamentally derived. Now provided this original truth happens to be wrested by any private fancy, or secret vice, no wonder that conclusions which are deduced from it are false and erroneous. Hence the Unitarians, by denying the fundamental doctrine of Christ's divinity, are necessarily led, in order to render themselves in some degree consistent, to deny the plain and leading doctrines of the scripture, nay in some degree to subvert the whole scheme of Christianity.

The abuse of principles consists either

First, in throwing absurd and corrupt glosses upon them, or drawing wrong conclusions from right premises; or

Secondly, in extending the truth of them to other sciences, and employing them to support conclusions contrary to the nature of the subject to which they belong.

As

As to the *first*, it has ever been the custom of *Error* to conceal itself, either from a motive of subtlety or modesty, under the veil of truth; and in order to render its fanciful delusions more plausible, to ground them upon unquestionable principles. But this certainly argues great perverseness of mind, first to entertain corrupt notions, and then to wrest unquestionable principles in order to countenance and support them. As to the

Second particular, in which the abuse of principles consists, *Aristotle* very justly observes, that principles and conclusions ought to be within the sphere of the same science; and that a man of learning ought not to make excursions, in the prosecution of a subject, from one science to another. This confusion in the dependencies of truth, by transferring principles to sciences to which they don't belong, has ever been prejudicial to Truth; and *Error* has stole upon the weakest apprehensions, while they have examined the conclusions of one science

science by the principles of another*. As when religion, which ought to subdue and captivate, is obliged to stoop and pay homage to reason; and, when those assents, which should be grounded on *Faith*, and not on mere human disquisition, are admitted no further than they are agreeable to nature. And hence it is that so many of the philosophers have denied those two principal doctrines of the Creation, and Resurrection, by reason they opposed those chief principles of nature (which are indeed naturally true and no further) that *ex nihilo nihil fit*, nothing can be made of nothing; and *a privatione ad habitum non datur regressus*, that there is no regress from a total privation to the habit lost. This reason was evidently implied in that answer which was given by him who was no stranger to the fountain of all *Error*, to such as obstinately opposed the resurrection, *you err, not knowing the scriptures, nor*

* It had been happy for Dr. *Priestly* and some others, had he always properly attended to this circumstance.

the power of God *. This contains those principles which are necessary in order to unfold to us the mystery of the resurrection, namely, the word and power of God: the latter commanding our assent to what is possible; and the former giving us the strongest assurance of a thing which will actually be accomplished. To be unacquainted with these two principles, and pretend to examine mysteries by the rules of reason, which ought to pay an implicit obedience, is the certain road to error, and depravity in point of understanding.

Secondly, a vain affectation of singularity, and a contempt for the common and established opinion of mankind, is another source of Error. To think with the world, is, unfortunately, to be no wiser than the world. But to deviate from *the good old way* †, and wander through unfrequented paths, to oppose the common sentiments of mankind and in points where they are most united, is the peculiar and distinguish-

* *Matt.* xxii. 29.

† *Jer.* vi. 6.

ing characteristic of a modern child of wisdom. From an ambition of appearing wiser than the rest of mankind, they wou'd fain have us believe that nothing is right which has been said already; and regard every thing as more valuable in proportion to its novelty. "The collective wisdom and exemplary piety of preceding generations, are to the philosopher a stumbling block, and to the innovator foolishness*."

White's Sermon at Bampton's Lecture.

p. 14.

Thirdly,

"* Hoary and venerable Error, says Dr. Harwood, would to this moment have maintained her throne, and the empire of darkness and dullness been perpetuated to the end of time, and there never would have existed any such religion as the Christian, any such characters among mankind as Martyrs and Confessors, or any such illustrious names in the annals of the world, as religious reformations, had wise and good men ever complimented priests and princes with believing as they believed, and sacrificed their understandings at the shrine of popular superstition." Preface to his *Five Dissertations*.—We have here a great deal more of pompous declamation than solid argument. For if Dr. Harwood's mode

show Thirdly, on the contrary too strong a pre-
 position in favour of authority, may, un-
 doubtedly, give birth to Error, as well as

- of reasoning be just and conclusive, and it is the favorite ar-
 gument of the present day against the established church, it
 involves alike men of all parties and principles. *Arius, Socin-*
us, Athanasius, together with the whole army of *Martyrs,*
Confessors and *Reformers*, must be buried in the rubbish of some
 hundred years, if wise and good men are never to compli-
 ment them in believing as they believed. Nay, a *Harwood,*
Priestly, Graham, Lindsey, Disney, &c. have no right, upon
 their own principles, to claim the attention of the present, or
 succeeding generations; but must, perhaps will, be clean for-
 got, as dead men out of mind. The truth is, Dr. *Harwood*,
 as every other gentleman, has a right to judge for himself, and
 to follow the honest convictions of his own mind. But it does
 not follow from hence, as the *Unitarians* basely insinuate, that
 every *sincere* maintainer of the doctrines of the church of *Eng-*
land, is a *knave* and superstitious *fool*. It is only by their
 fruits that we can know the true characters of men; an impe-
 netrable vail shrouds the heart, which no eye can pierce, but
 that of Omniscience. If the *Unitarians* fancy that their un-
 derstandings are better informed than those of other men, it
 were to be wished that they were more attentive to the im-
 provement of their tempers and spirits: a bad heart with right
 notions is much worse than a good heart with wrong notions;
 for if the heart be wrong, it matters little that the head is
 right. But so it is, that the further we recede from the true
 principles of christianity, the more we lose of the genuine
 spirit of love and lenity, meekness and moderation, and every
 other grace and virtue of the Christian.

affectation

affectation of singularity. As we ought not to be always cavelling when we peruse the works of men of learning, knowledge and piety, because by this means we shall never come to any fixed and settled resolution, so neither ought we to resign our judgments implicitly; because we are not obliged to believe absolutely independent of reason, except the authority is unquestionable and infallible. Our worthy reformers challenge indeed the highest degree of reverence and admiration from us*, yet we ought

* As Dr. Priestly, is no respecter of the authority attached to names, he exclaims with an air of contempt, "Who are they that we must call *Reformers*, and by the opinions of which of them must we abide? Did not *Calvin* see further than *Luther*, or do you rest where *Luther* did, and admit the doctrine of consubstantiation? Would you exactly follow the steps of *Calvin*; then you must use sports on the Lord's Day, and instead of *writing* against, burn me at the stake, as he did *Servetus*. If the reformers differed from one another, why may we not differ from them all? You will hardly maintain their inspiration. What authority have you to suppose, that the divine Being confined the reformation to that particular age? Is it not much more probable, that it was begun then, and that it is our duty to carry it on," *Considerations on differences among Christians, with a letter to Mr. Venn, 1769. p. 53.*

ought not to permit this reverence to degenerate into a blind superstition and idolatry. For 'tis our duty rather to speak truth with nature, than to be erroneous with *Aristotle*. As we ought not in short, to over-rate their writings by reposing an im-

This mode of reasoning is absurd and ridiculous to the last degree; it militates as strongly against Dr. Priestly, as *Luther*, *Calvin*, or any other reformer; and may be used with equal truth and propriety, by every succeeding generation, until the end of time. Let us apply it to modern reformers. Who are we to call reformers, and by the opinion of which of them must we abide? Do not Dr. Priestly, *Graham*, *Lindsey*, *Disney*, &c. see further than Dr. *Clarke*? Do you rest where Dr. *Clarke* did, then you must allow that, "*with the first and supreme cause or father of all things there has existed from the beginning, a second divine person which is the Word or Son,*" &c. *Scrip. Doc. of the Trin.* part ii. § 2, 3. And that "*Christ is by nature truly God, as truly as man is by nature truly man,*" &c. *Reply to Mr. Nelson*, p. 81. And yet that he is inferior to the Father. Would you exactly follow Dr. Priestly, *Lindsey*, &c. then you must be "*fully persuaded that Christ was a man like ourselves.*" Dr. Priestly's Lett. to Dr. *Horsley*. Preface p. 8. See Mr. *Lindsey's* Apol. Passim. "*A man who lived among us, and died upon the cross, a mere creature.*" Dr. *Disney's* Reasons, &c. p. 14. If these Reformers differ so widely from one another, why may not the church of England differ from them all. You will kindly maintain their inspiration, at least, Dr. Priestly has no just claim to it, since he has denied that privilege to the *Apostles*.

plieit faith in them, since their authors were men, subject to Error, and therefore capable of imposing on us; so neither ought we to undervalue them, since they have deserved so well of all posterity, they have a just right to challenge our assent to their authority, though not in a slavish manner, but with a firm resolution to embrace truth, in preference to any human authority whatsoever.

Fourthly, Curiosity may probably be another cause of Error. Men are apt to push their enquiries beyond the limits prescribed them; and covet most eagerly that knowlege which it is impossible, in our present state, with certainty, to arrive at. By this means they lavish away their time in unprofitable researches, which might have been employed upon the most useful and important truths. For the most profound speculations must finally resolve all into the will of God. Besides they are attended with danger: when we reflect, that a certain ambition of being wiser, and know-
ing

ing more than was permitted to human nature, occasioned the expulsion of our first parent out of Paradise, the forfeiture of the divine favour, and immortal happiness.

“ Thus men, extending their enquiries beyond their capacities, and letting their thoughts wander into the depths where they can find no sure footing, it is no wonder that they raise questions, and multiply disputes, which never coming to any clear resolution, are proper only to continue and increase their doubts, and to confirm them at last in perfect scepticism. Whereas were the capacities of our understandings well considered, the extent of our knowledge once discovered, and the horizon found, which sets the bounds between the enlightened and dark parts of things, between what is, and what is not comprehensible by us; men would perhaps with less scruple, acquiesce in the avowed ignorance of the one, and employ their thoughts and discourses with more advantage and satisfaction in the other.”—*Locke's Essay*
on

on the Human Understanding. Introduction. § 7.

The *last* source of Error that I shall take notice of is placing too great an esteem upon some particular objects, which induces the mind to conceive that they are possessed of such excellencies as do not belong to their nature. In short we are apt to look upon every thing as unquestionable and authentic of which we are deeply enamoured. Hence that variety of opinions respecting the sovereign good, which could only arise from hence, that every philosopher placed his approbation on that particular object which was most pleasing and satisfactory to his own corrupt nature; and accordingly searched for it, not where it was to be met with, but in himself, measuring it by the rule of his own distemper'd and prejudiced judgment. The result of this was, and ever will be, the production of many monstrous Errors, which varied according to the predominant passion for pleasure, wealth, grandeur, honor, fame, liberty,

liberty, or any other secular or sensual objects. In this respect men take a very preposterous method; they first conceive a passion for an object, without giving themselves leave to examine into the value of it, and then employ *reason* and *scripture* to support and countenance their absurd choice.

I cannot better conclude these few remarks and observations which have been made with no other view, than a sincere desire to guard the truths, and promote the best interests of christianity, than in the words of a truly learned and excellent prelate.

“ And will the righteous judge of all the earth condemn us for want of understanding? No; but he may and will condemn us for the *wrong conduct* of our understanding. It is not indeed in our power to believe whatever we please, whether credible or incredible; but it is in our power to consider thoroughly, whether a suppo-

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incredibility ~~be~~ real or only apparent. It is in our power to bestow a greater or less degree of attention on the evidence before us. It is in our power to examine it with an earnest desire to find out the truth, and a firm resolution to embrace it wherever we do find it; or on the contrary, to bring with us a heart full of incorrigible depravity, or invincible prepossessions. To the modest and humble, the diligent and virtuous enquirer, who labours after conviction, but cannot thoroughly arrive at it; who never attempts or wishes to infuse his scruples into others; who earnestly strives, who fervently prays, for more light and strength; crying out with all the passionate sincerity of an honest heart, "Lord, I believe, help thou mine Unbelief", *Mark ix, 24*. To him every equitable allowance will undoubtedly be made, every instance of compassionate tenderness be shewn—But to the man of pride and paradox, who burns to distinguish himself from the vulgar by the novelty of his opinions, and would disdain to follow the common herd

(30)

of mankind, even though ~~he~~ knew they were leading him to heaven; to the subtle minute philosopher, who refines away every dictate of common sense, and is lost in the dark profound of his own wretched sophistry;—To these, and all like these, the Almighty will one day most assuredly shew, that his gracious offers of Salvation are not to be despised, and trampled upon, and ridiculed with impunity."

Dr. *Porteus's*, Lord Bishop of Chester,
Sermons. Serm. ii. p. 39.

F I N I S.



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